

The 'International University' In The Age of Globalization: A Unifier of Knowledge Or An Information Factory?*

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One of the institutions radically being transformed by the information technology is the University, the generic institution that has functioned as the primary creator, disseminator and storehouse of knowledge. What will be the impact of these new information technologies on universities? Will universities integrate globally into an International University to serve as World – Wide cultural bridge, a universal unifying force, bringing peoples and cultures together within the Global Family? Or, will they rather become worldwide "Knowledge Factories" pushing new digital data and packaged information as commodities for economic gain?

This paper will discuss these questions. The paper is organized in three Parts. The next Part will present an overview of the crisis of the Western University. This will be followed by a discussion of challenges of Islamic University. Finally, the paper will highlight some of the major conclusions of the discussion.

Part I Introduction

In a small, but insightful book, *Civilization on Trial*, written more than half a century ago, the great English historian, Arnold Toynbee, expressed great pessimism about the prospects of Western civilization which he found to be Eurocentric (Toynbee 1948). Toynbee's study of history was universalistic, reflecting a deep knowledge and respect for non – Western cultures and civilizations. For Toynbee history was unified whole; it was a universal history of the entire humanity, not just of some Western people. In this sense, Toynbee is similar to the great Muslim scholar, Ibn Khaldun, the author of *Muqaddimah*, written almost six centuries ago, as an inquiry into the causes of the rise and decline of civilizations (Mehmet 1990: 81–4).

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The common theme in Toynbee and Ibn Khaldun provides us with the framework for analyzing the great challenge of Globalization in our time. What does Globalization mean? What are its causes? What are the prospects? Will it unify or will it destroy human civilization? We shall attempt to analyze these questions in the spirit of Toynbee and Ibn Khaldun.

We start by noting that Globalization is a phenomenon with multiple meanings. For many, it means free trade and integration of markets into one global market place. For some, it means empowering Multi National Corporations (MNCs), those international firms seeking profits globally without allegiance to any one country or government. For others, globalization means the erosion of the power of the Nation – State and the rise supra – national bodies such as the European Parliament or empowerment of MNCs.

In a spirit closer to Toynbee, globalization means unifying humanity, transition to the "Global Village" or the emergence of one big "global family", made up of different religions and cultures. True internationalists hope that the Global Village will be built on unified knowledge, representing the best values of humanity, bringing faiths and cultures together united in to tolerance, equality and mutual respect. But, globalization is also confusing and threatening, destroying old ways and norms, creating new risks and uncertainties.

How do we analyze and explain these great changes unfolding before our eyes? What are the causes and likely consequences? By far the most important causal factor behind contemporary forces of globalization is the Computer Revolution. The new digital technology has revolutionized information and has virtually eliminated time and distance. Now TV viewers are like spectators in a global theatre who can watch events around the world literally as they unfold. From the Olympic competitions, to wars, earthquakes, and ethnic conflict, or political summit meetings – all these events are accessible to global audiences around the clock as breaking news.

Not just the TV and news media, but the world of business and politics are being radically transformed by the Computer Revolution. The internet, e-mail and the World – Wide – Web have put consumers and producers on the electronic highway. Digital information has drastically altered the traditional forms of exchanging, disseminating, collecting and storing information. CD-ROMs and on-line information sources have emerged as virtual knowledge. This may constitute a growing threat for encyclopedia, and books, libraries and newsprint.

But, virtual knowledge is INFORMATION, made up of raw and processed data, essential as an economic input in the production process. As such, information is not to be confused with KNOWLEDGE as accumulated wisdom of all humanity. Knowledge is universal truth, time-tested by generations of scholars. By contrast, information is young and untested, often subject to serious questions of quality and

reliability. This is especially so in the case of computer information to be found on the electronic highway where standards and quality control rules do not yet exist.

Yet, it is undeniable that the computer is transforming our traditional concepts of Property, Power as well as Knowledge. As the 20th century draws to a close, and humanity stands at the dawn of a new Millenium, the rules and institutions are still largely undefined and unregulated to cope with the challenges of the information technology in the global economy (Alic 1997).

One of the institutions radically being transformed by the information technology is the University, the generic institution that has functioned as the primary creator, disseminator and storehouse of knowledge. What will be the impact of these new information technologies on universities? Will universities integrate globally into an International University to serve as World – Wide cultural bridge, a universal unifying force, bringing peoples and cultures together within the Global Family? Or, will they rather become worldwide "Knowledge Factories" (Economist, 1997) pushing new digital data and packaged information as commodities for economic gain?

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Part II

The Crisis of the Western University

In the West, the modern university has, at least since Reformation, been the leading center of modern knowledge, innovating and discovering new scientific and technical know-how. New medical knowledge has conquered disease; discoveries and breakthroughs in science and engineering have facilitated the rise of the industrial civilization based on mass production and mass consumption. New technologies in land, air and sea transportation have contributed to economic and military might of the West, and along with the Industrial Revolution, these advances have paved the way for imperial expansion and colonization. The result has been globalization of Western capitalism, a world system that has enriched the West while impoverishing the Rest (Mehmet 1995, 1999). Economic prosperity in the West has also brought reforms in political, social, economic and legal fields have consolidated the rules and institutions of market democracy based on the sovereignty of the voter with a strong and informed Middle Class.

The Western University has always led the way in these advances and breakthroughs, innovations and reforms. That is because the University has traditionally functioned as a free marketplace of ideas, freely expressed, dedicated

to the pursuit of academic excellence. Most recently the Western University emerged as a major international business (Rudner 1997). The unique characteristic of the Western University is the fact that it has followed an open-door policy in accessibility, and has recruited faculty globally, on the basis of merit regardless of race, creed or nationality.

Traditionally, the Western University has enjoyed three major characteristics: Firstly, it has been a prime example of a "public good" with net external benefits, i.e. funded by general tax revenues, justified on the basis of the greater public interest. As a public good, access and rewards of the system have been based on merit and merit alone.

Secondly, the University has been dedicated to the pursuit of secular knowledge and independent research based on secular scientific foundations. Well – funded research programs were an integral part of University life, solid teaching requiring solid research.

Thirdly, the Western University was an institution of academic excellence resting on fame and prestige. It attracted students and top teachers and researchers from around the globe, concentrating in its halls the best brains from around the globe, even at the cost of Brain Drain. This has been especially true for the American University system, even though, as Ali Mazrui has correctly stated, "the United States has been a great asylum for people, (although) it has not been a great refuge for cultures." (1997:2)

Each and every one of these three fundamental characteristics is now in serious question. Several recent books and articles published on both sides of the Atlantic capture the nature of the crisis of the Western University (Halliday 1998, Economist 1997). Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* is a passionate lament of the vulgarization of teaching in America. Bill Reading's *The University in Ruins* is an equally devastating critique of the corporate takeover and management of higher education.

What precisely are the underlying causes of a systemic crisis now facing the Western University? Three main reasons can be cited.

The first is the chronic underfunding of public education in general, but of higher education in particular. The University is suffering from budget cutbacks, prom reduction and declining R&D expenditures. The underfunding crisis is a by-product of neo – conservative ideology, which espouses small government and views the profit – driven private – sector as the leading engine of economic growth.

The second reason for the crisis of the Western University has to do with the fundamental difference between knowledge and information. Knowledge is the pursuit of truth and excellence in the arts and sciences, whereas information is data statistical and non – statistical. Information as data is a factor of production, like capital or labour, essential for higher productivity and profit.

The new computer technology has expanded accessibility and flow of information beyond anything imaginable a few decades ago. It has been good for business. Whether, however, this information explosion has resulted in a proportionate growth of human knowledge is a moot question. For example, the new information technology has surely enabled greater and quicker access to news on TV relating to wars and revolutions in different parts of the world, but such news and information has hardly advanced the cause of international peace and understanding.

The root problem is a confusion of information with knowledge. To cite one notable example, The World Bank, in its 1998/99 World Development Report, talks of the "Knowledge for Development", but in fact, the Bank clearly means information. More specifically, the World Bank is endorsing the information technology, representing new investment and innovation for higher rate of economic growth. This is all neo-liberal ideology extolling the virtues of capitalist market system.

The identification of information technology with knowledge transforms the character and role of the University, the traditional custodian of knowledge. When knowledge becomes a specialized commodity, prized for its property value, determined in the market place, market forces become the driving motive. The campus loses its comparative advantage as the source of learning and research leading to new inventions and ideas. The University, traditionally funded by public taxes, faces increasing competition from industrial parks and technology centers (such as the Silicon Valley) owned and financed by profit-seeking corporations answerable to stockholders.

As a public institution, the University is ill-suited in the competition it faces from corporate sector. In the capitalist system, the market is supreme; all else is subordinate. Therefore, as information displaces knowledge, the University's quality declines. This occurs for two principal reasons. On the one hand, the University experiences a brain drain as specialists and creative minds relocate to technology centers in the corporate sector attracted or co-opted by higher financial rewards. By contrast, public funding for the University declines and relative salaries of faculty fall as political elites attempt to force curriculum changes in the University as a means of subordinating its function to corporate requirements. The end result is that the University itself becomes a consumer of digital information, no longer a leader in the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Thus, instructors and students rely on the WWW, e-mail, and CD-ROMs as new sources of information, and class-room is replaced by electronic discussion groups, and learning is identified with virtual knowledge. Atop the University administration; the Board of Governors are forced by political elites into corporate alliances, ostensibly to secure alternate sources of funds. In the process, however, they become willing agents in altering the curriculum and teaching and research activities in short to subordinate the

University to corporate requirements dictated externally by a global competitive game for markets and profits.

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The third, and most damaging influence now affecting the Western University, is a steady decline in the value of higher due to rising materialism. The university degree is no longer the passport to higher-paying jobs. The bulk of graduates in liberal arts and humanities are no longer employable or desirable as generalists, possessing general knowledge. By contrast, those graduating as specialists in computer – related or management field are in demand and can command high salaries. As a result these market forces, the University is rapidly being reformed and restructured: Business schools, computer science departments and related fields are being expanded, while liberal arts, humanities, classics are being shot down. This may appear warranted in the short-term policy it is self-destructive. Subordinating the University to labour market requirements, vocationalises the University and transforms learning into to a commodity consisting of virtual knowledge. As with any commodity, the value is the price determined in some market. The price, however, is subject to business cycles, sometimes rising, sometimes falling. Putting the University on a business cycle footing is not conducive to the creation and dissemination of knowledge. This, in brief, is the essence of the crisis now facing the Western University. What are the root causes of this crisis?

Many explanations may be offered, but the fundamental reason is materialism. Materialism is a value-system in which what is valuable is determined in the market place according to the doctrine of consumer sovereignty. In reality, however, what is sovereign in the market place is the pursuit of material gain, specifically profit, and not the consumer. Consumerism, as it has evolved in the West, is not based on human needs. It is rather a distortion of consumer behavior, shaped by advertising and marketing techniques, often using misinformation and other gimmicks to create imagined demands. The result of consumerism is a mindless accumulation of goods, without any concern for the environment or social responsibility. If something sells and creates a profit, it is valuable and justifies growth and expansion.

Higher moral values have no relevance in the market. Indeed, profitability replaces morality as the yardstick of public value. But, when public values decline, the deterioration of public institutions cannot be far behind.

Materialism, consumerism and profit motive, have now replaced what once were viewed as strong values originating from Protest Ethics. Western societies are no longer driven by the values formulated by the principles of hard work, productivity, honesty and fair play. Now all that is considered valuable is measured by material acquisitions such as how many cars, TVs, kitchen appliances and electronic products one has. Family is no longer what it used to be as both partners (sometimes same – sex) now have to get a job in order to maintain a life - style that is highly capital-intensive and at the same time exceedingly wasteful. Young children are

now in day-care and nurseries, not growing up at home under parental guidance, because parents are out working to earn money. TV and newspapers are full of advertising and marketing conditioning generations of consumers for built-in obsolescence.

Capitalism is the greatest invention of the West. It is a Eurocentric system of resource exploitation which subordinates equity and ethics for greater efficiency (Mehmet 1995, 1999). Under capitalism, human beings are valued for their human capital, not for virtue or other ethical qualities. In capitalist markets, knowledge itself is treated as intellectual property. Ecology and environment become environmental assets. All of these forms of property are tradable as private property. Every conceivable form of public goods is being privatized: not only schools and hospitals, but also even prisons.

The erosion of ethics in the marketplace matches these changes in the capitalist economy. Thus, in corporate America some of the fastest growing sectors are gambling and pornography, often protected under right to freedom legislation. Getting rich in playing the stock market through speculation has become national habit. The dominant view now is that in business, ethics do not apply. For business is the way to wealth; so long as wealth is created in the end, the means do not matter.

One of the most serious and damaging effects of the mindless consumerist mentality is environmental degradation. Western capitalism evolved out of exploitation of natural resources of the New World. Free land acquired by conquest, coupled in the Deep South USA by slaves imported for the purpose, enabled new settlement and industrial development. Mass production, initiated by Henry Ford's Model T car, emerged as an essential part of the American Dream. That Dream now has approached an ecological limit. The pollution of waters and lakes, the ozone layer, global warming, are all manifestations of the physical limits of Western capitalism.

Yet, the Western University is, like a slow-moving train, chugging along unconcerned. Fund-raising from outside sources, especially from the corporate sector, has replaced academic excellence as the prized measure of productivity and achievement for the faculty. The best minds amongst lecturers have become celebrity stars, joining the high-fee lecture tour and TV shows. Organized on disciplinary lines, there is fragmentation of knowledge inside, and social isolation of, the Ivory Tower. Departments of Economics and Business Schools are teaching courses extolling the techniques of profit-oriented capitalism, dismissing critical voices of ecologists and environmentalists. Departments of Philosophy and Ethics are experiencing declining enrollments, while the fate falling Departments of Classics is even worse: they are being forced to shut-down or merge with Departments of Religion in order to balance shrinking budgets. Faculties of Education and Teacher Training Institutes have become supply-managing bodies in

a period of declining demand for teachers who are now increasingly being replaced by computers in the classrooms and libraries. Departments of Sociology and Anthropology are arguably the worst-cases, torn asunder by feminist radicalism and political correctness that have replaced objectivity in critical inquiry. By contrast, Politics and International Studies are experiencing expansion, but even here, there is relatively little concern for curriculum reform to promote wider understanding and inter-cultural dialogue in the emerging Global Village to reflect its rich, cultural diversity.

All in all, the Western University is currently in a systemic crisis. This is not, however, a permanent crisis, signaling the end of University. Like preceding crises in the history of knowledge, the present one will pass and the University will, in time, recover. The current crisis is partly structural stemming from adjustment challenges of the digital information technology, and partly it is ideological manifesting a cyclical swing toward the right of the political pendulum. The crisis will, sooner or later, pass and the quest for knowledge will continue, more global and more unified, thank, in no small measure, to globalized means of disseminating, exchanging and sharing information.

Part III

The University in the Muslim World

The search for knowledge is an well. Muslim scholarship in the Golden Age of Islamic scholarship, before Europe's Dark Ages, has made great contributions to humanity's knowledge as testified by the very name of major branches of knowledge such as algebra, chemistry and philosophy. The last great Muslim scholar of world renown was Ibn Khaldun in the 14th century, a brilliant unifier of knowledge who pioneered many of the central ideas of modern sociology, economics, history and many other disciplines (Mehmet 1990). Ibn Khaldun was a model for many Western scholars, including Arnold Toynbee. Regrettably, his influence in orthodox Muslim scholarship has been surprisingly limited (Mehmet 1990: 81), owing in a large measure to the closing of the Gate of Ijtihat, the source of independent critical inquiry based on reason and intellect.

For almost six centuries or more, The Gate of Ijtihat has remained closed in the Muslim world, and Muslim scholarship suffered as a consequence. Although Al Azhar was the earliest surviving University in the world, its scholarship in arts and sciences failed to match the achievements of Oxford, Cambridge and other Western universities. The secular decline of the Muslim world enabled colonial penetration causing further decline in the quality of life in Muslim societies. It is only in the recent past in this century that reawakening began among Muslim people. But there is still a long way to go.

The University in Muslim societies in the second half of the 20th century, in the period of post-colonialism, has been shaped as much by Western influences as by national and domestic priorities. Often these national priorities have been the wrong ones. As a result, educational attainment is still highly inadequate in many poor Muslim countries, clearly the result of insufficient funding as well as administrative and cultural barriers. In particular, the educational opportunities available to females is restricted by cultural taboo and in places like Afghanistan it is outright denied by extremists using, or abusing, Islam for political ends. The African University, optimistically viewed in the early post-independence years as major instruments of nation-building, became what Ali Mazrui called "cultural dependency", indulging in futile and wasteful copying of alien models from Europe or the USA, instead of "domesticating" knowledge and culture (Mazrui 1992). As exemplified by another great Muslim scholar, Edward Said (1978), the architect of Orientalism, much of the arts and literature of the West is Eurocentric. Distorted images and biased history do not represent Knowledge based on truth and universal values. The same is true even in economics, supposedly a value-free discipline (Mehmet 1995, 1999). All these Eurocentric, hence distorted and biased "knowledge", must be de-constructed as part of universal search for Knowledge. The essential de-construction work has both an internal and external challenge, obliging Muslim and non-Muslim scholars to work co-operatively in the propagation of Knowledge based on truth and universal values.

Looking at internal aspects of the issue, regaining the lost tradition of high scholarship achieved in the Golden Age of Islam is a major Muslim challenge. Ensuring nationally universal education, of high quality, for all should be the key objective for poor Muslim countries. This is essential to fight poverty and underdevelopment, the most serious threat facing Muslim societies at the present time. Poverty is not kismet, designed by God. It is the result of faulty economic policy. Human Development (UNDP 1999), rather than resource exploitation for highest profit, must be ultimate aim of economic policy. Structural adjustment programs imported from the West have worsened educational access and economic survival in many countries such as Indonesia and especially in African countries. At the same time, ruling elites in many of these countries have chosen to give far greater priority on military expenditures than on education and socio-economic development. By so doing, they have created more poverty and social discourse, in the process hastening their own downfall.

But the issue has an equally important external aspect, i.e. in the non-Muslim world, especially as we move toward the Global Village. In the Global Village there can be only one, unified Knowledge, for truth is indivisible as are fundamental human values. For example, there can be one universal mathematics or medicine, not fragmented into Muslim and Western branches. This unified knowledge is the foundation of the future Global University. In the new Millenium the Global

University must promote an integrated social, political and scientific knowledge fit for the common good of the whole humankind.

Unified knowledge in the spirit of Ibn Khaldun and Arnold Toynbee is essential for world governance based on tolerance, cooperation and peaceful co-existence.

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Just as diversity abounds in the plant and animal kingdom, cultural diversity in the humankind must be celebrated, not repressed. Inter - civilizational and inter-faith dialogue, rather than Clash of Civilizations a la Huntington, is the way to foster and develop universal knowledge for the common good of all living in the Global Village.

The future Muslim University has to be at the forefront of this inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue leading to unified knowledge in the Global Village, First, however, some fundamental questions about ends and means need to be clarified before and effective inter-cultural dialogue can be launched and managed to a satisfactory conclusion. What is the purpose of the University in Muslim lands; secular knowledge or theology, or perhaps more appropriately, what is the proper balance? Implicit behind this question is the matter of resolving an inherent tension between academic freedom and free expression of ideas versus state control directly or indirectly through state funding.

At the present there is a wide gulf which separates the Muslim and the Western University. To reduce the gulf, external and internal challenges must be overcome.

The Western leadership in the new information technology gives Western scholars a huge comparative advantage in expanding the boundaries of knowledge. Significantly, the new information technology is expanding the study of Islam itself. New centers dedicated for the study of Islam in the modern world are mushrooming up in Europe and North America. "Digital Islam" is now "on-line" globally connecting discussion groups and information networks. To cite just one example, the information pages of the March 1999 Newsletter of the ISIM (International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World) based in Netherlands, lists no less than 42 centers, equipped with websites, emails and other information networking facilities. These new information technologies are transforming the concepts of Ummah, indeed what Islam itself is, and who possesses authority to speak on its behalf.

In Islamic lands, there is a huge challenge facing Muslim scholars in their efforts to catch up and match Western achievements in new information technologies and in the global marketplace of ideas, of arts and sciences. These achievements are the product of dedicated pursuit of scholarly excellence in learning and research carried in academic freedom in an open and free society. There can be no alternative to the development of these conditions in Muslim societies if Muslim scholars are ever going to make a real contribution toward unifying knowledge globally. Unified global knowledge can either come about as a result of Western dominance or it can

emerge as a blending of the best contributions from all cultures and religions of humanity. Muslim scholars have a special responsibility in this global venture: viz. to engage in a productive dialogue with their Non-Muslim counterparts and provide meaningful input into the creation of a unified global knowledge. They must be assisted in this venture with appropriate government incentives and support. Failure to do can only isolate the Muslim societies, fragment knowledge behind cultural walls, and retard the evolution of the Global Village based on tolerance, peace and security.

To conclude on a positive note with a specific proposal, there is a highly pragmatic and cost – effective way of narrowing the cultural divide between the Western and Muslim, worlds: Utilize Muslim scholars in Western universities. These scholars have extensive knowledge not only of their own chosen fields, but as well of the West in general, while possessing a Muslim cultural heritage that qualify them for participation in this inter-cultural dialogue. Conferences and seminars, similar to this present one, are excellent means for this purpose. But more is needed, especially in sponsoring joint research and academic projects between scholars in Muslim universities and their Muslim counterparts in the West.

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